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"SEILEAG": THE UNKNOWN ANIMAL(S) OF LOCH SHIEL, SCOTLAND

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ABSTRACT: An animal or animals with similar morphological characteristics as those reported for Nessie may inhabit Scotland's Loch Shiel. Evidence to support the existence of "Seileag" is scarce, due, perhaps, to the remoteness of the lake. Nonetheless, recorded sightings at Loch Shiel, and sightings of similar animals in the marine waters adjacent to Loch Shiel, suggest the loch may be the restricted or temporary habitat of large, unidentified animals.

Reports of large, unidentified animals observed in Scottish inland waters are not restricted to the more publicized Loch Ness and Loch Morar (Zarzynski and Meaney 1982). Seileag—pronounced "Sheelack"—is another of these supposed large aquatic animals which are seldom observed but occasionally mentioned as residents of Loch Shiel, Scotland's fifth largest loch, located in one of its most secluded regions.

I first visited Loch Shiel in 1979 while traveling by car through the village of Glenfinnan, at the northeastern head of the loch, on my way to Loch Morar. Glenfinnan is the site where Bonnie Prince Charlie landed and raised his standard prior to his defeat at the Battle of Culloden in 1746. A monument commemorates the event (Fig. 1). I passed by Loch Shiel via Glenfinnan again in 1981 and 1982. However, it was not until 1984 that I was able to spend more time at Loch Shiel and more thoroughly investigate local sightings of Seileag.

Loch Shiel is 17 miles long (Murray 1968), and is between 100 yards and a mile wide (Atkinson 1983). Its bed is very irregular, alternating between deep and shallow. Although more than half of Loch Shiel's depth is less than 100 feet, its maximum depth, located 4 miles west of Glenfinnan, is 420 feet. Deep water is often found close in to shore, while, at the widest part of the loch, there is an expanse in the middle which is reportedly only 2–3 feet deep (Weir 1980).

Loch Shiel's weather can discourage visitors who might otherwise intend to have a lengthy stay there. Normally, the weather is wet except for May and June, when it is drier and not as windy (Weir 1980).

To thoroughly appreciate why very little is known of the reported animals in Loch Shiel, one need only survey the region's topography. Loch Shiel is a bow-shaped loch running from Glenfinnan in the northeast to the village of Acharacle in the southwest (Fig. 2). Its center line is the boundary between Ardgour and Moidart, and between Argyll and Inverness-shire (Murray 1968). Rugged, mountainous terrain hems in the loch's northern two-thirds, making

FIG. 1.—A view of Loch Shiel from the northeastern end. The Glenfinnan monument to Bonnie Prince Charlie is visible in the lower right hand corner.

it little more than a sliver in shoulder-to-shoulder mountains. Thus, it is little wonder that it lies in a region called *na garbh chriocnan* (Gaelic meaning "the Rough Bounds"). This name accurately describes the area—inaccessible, with rough, broken terrain (Gunn 1983).

The loch's sparse population also contributes to its isolation. Glenfinnan is a village of only 60–70 people. Acharacle is a scattered village, just a little larger than Glenfinnan. These are the only "major" population centers near the loch—except for Dalilea, a lochside niche with a few cottages, and several isolated seasonal cottages along the loch.

Access to the loch by road is to Glenfinnan via Route A830, and to Acharacle via Route A861. Glenfinnan is also a stop for the West Highland Railway from Fort William to Mallaig. This stretch was opened in 1901 (Gunn 1983).

The loch's shoreline was roadless until 1965–66, when the Forestry Commission constructed a 12-mile-long dirt road from Glenfinnan to Polloch on the Ardgour (south) side (Murray 1968). This road is not open to private vehicles, and a locked gate extends across it at Glenfinnan, thus preventing

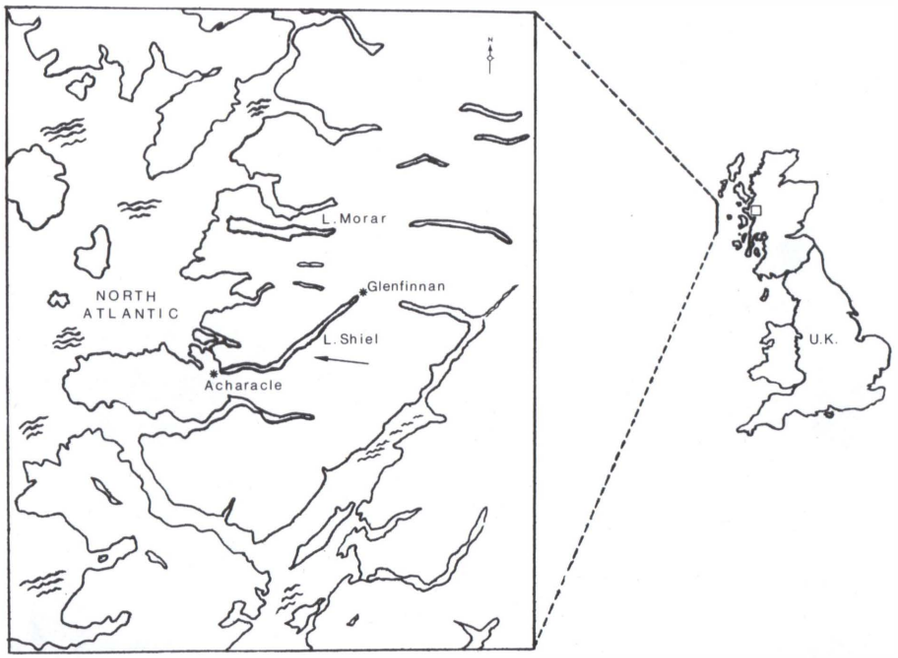

FIG. 2.—Loch Shiel (see arrow) is located in the western Scottish Highlands, a rugged and remote area.

nonofficial vehicular traffic. Daily boat sailings were once made between Acharacle to Glenfinnan, but these ended in 1967 (Murray 1968).

Loch Shiel's remoteness, its scanty population, the lack of a public road along the loch, and the cessation of the regular ferry service upon the loch, may all have contributed to the reduced chances of a surface sighting of the supposed animals inhabiting the loch.

Nevertheless, there have been several recorded sightings. Much of our knowledge of these sightings comes from Dom Cyril Dieckhoff's notes of 1933–34, a period when he toured the Shiel region as part of his pastoral responsibilities. Father Dieckhoff, of the Benedictine Abbey at Fort Augustus, had more than a passing interest in these reports, and he recorded the sightings for posterity. Father Dieckhoff died in 1970 (Campbell and Solomon 1972), but his interest in recording sightings of Seileag has recently been taken up by Tearlach MacFarlane, a resident of Glenfinnan. While living at Loch Ness as a young man, MacFarlane had sightings of Nessie, and he recently stated: ". . . knowing the witnesses as well as I do, I am now convinced that Seileag is with us" (MacFarlane, personal communication).

The following list attempts to compile all the known reports of Seileag from various sources:

1) Circa 1874, a woman who lived at Gaskan saw an animal with three humps; it moved very fast (Whyte 1957).

2) In 1911, an animal was observed by two men across from Gaskan. Using a telescope, they saw three humps, each separated by water. One of the witnesses was the former head keeper of the Inverailort Estate (Whyte 1957).

3) In 1905, Ewan MacIntosh, two young boys, and an old man named Ian Crookback were out on the steamer *Clan Ranald* across from Gaskan when they sighted three humps. They observed them through a telescope (Whyte 1957, Costello 1974).

4) In 1925, the animal was seen at Rhu Ghainmheach. Three humps were observed through a telescope, the middle hump being the largest; it was described as being "longer than the little mail steamer *Clan Ranald*" (Whyte 1957).

5) In 1926, Ronald MacLeod saw an animal coming out of the water at Sandy Point, between 3 and 4 p.m. MacLeod studied it through his telescope; he told his sister, Ann Mor MacDonald, that it was bigger than the *Clan Ranald,* with a long, thick neck, a broad head with a wide mouth, and seven "sails" on its back (Whyte 1957, Costello 1974).

6) In December 1933, Father Dieckhoff was informed by an old man who lived by the Shiel bridges of a sighting near Dalilea—date not recorded (Whyte 1957).

7) Sandie MacKellaig tried to shoot an animal (described as being a Seileag) from his boat while giving passage to two tinker women. The women admonished him saying, "Do not interfere with it, it has not done you any harm"—no date recorded (Whyte 1957, Costello 1974).

Tearlach MacFarlane has catalogued two more recent sightings at Loch Shiel.

8) In the 1950's, an animal was sighted about 6 miles from Glenfinnan (MacFarlane, personal communication).

9) In July, 1979, there was a sighting by two local youths from the pier at Glenfinnan (MacFarlane, personal communication).

In addition to the above, a review of the "sea serpent" literature reveals several sightings of animals similar in appearance to Seileag (or Nessie) being observed in Scotland's coastal waters, just a few miles from Loch Shiel (unlike some Scottish lochs, which are actually marine fjords, Loch Shiel, like Ness and Morar, is a freshwater lake):

1) In summer, 1932, a dark, grey animal was observed by a number of people from Smirissary Point, at a range of 60 yards. Its head and neck were seen. It disappeared, and then a large hump was viewed (Whyte 1957).

2) Another large, unidentified creature was observed near Arisaig in Loch nan Uamh, a fjord (Whyte 1957).

3) Circa 1900, a "sea serpent" was seen off Rhum (Heuvelmans 1968).

4) In 1965, an unknown animal was seen off Ardnamurchan (McEwan 1978).

Possibly linked with these coastal "sea serpent" sightings is the derivation of the name of Shona, for a nearby island, and a superstition associated with the island. The island takes its name from the Celtic sea god *Shoney.* Sacrifices to *Shoney,* usually of fish, were made by local fishermen up until the 1800's (Atkinson 1983). One may wonder if this ritual was somehow related to sightings of large, unidentified animals that frequented the nearby coastal waters.

This brings up an old question which is often asked about Nessie: Is Seileag restricted to Loch Shiel alone, or is it mobile, utilizing the short (3-mile) stretch of the River Shiel between the loch and the sea?

Loch Shiel and its adjacent marine waters could well become a cryptozoological field laboratory, much as Loch Morar has occasionally been studied by groups and individuals working at Loch Ness. If so, we may one day learn if Tearlach MacFarlane's statement on Seileag is correct: possibly there is "a survivor or two in this loch yet."

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